

## Summary and Critique of the “Bondar Report”

by Michael J. Richardson

In March 2007 the Ontario Ministry of Education formed a Working Group on Environmental Education to analyze the need to teach and learn about the environment. It also charged the Working Group with researching past approaches to teaching and learning about environmental education in elementary and secondary schools. Chaired by Roberta Bondar, the Working Group comprises experts and practitioners in the field of environmental education.

The Working Group’s findings and recommendations were presented in a June 2007 report to Dr. Dennis Thiessen, Chair of the Curriculum Council of the Ministry of Education. Entitled *Shaping Our Schools, Shaping Our Future*, the report has become more commonly referred to simply as the “Bondar Report.”

The report begins by recognizing the fragmentation and inconsistency of environmental education throughout Ontario and gives examples of objectives found within the elementary and secondary school’s curriculum. It points out that some environmentally related courses at these levels are mandatory while others are optional. The report acknowledges a gap between current environmental education practices and a comprehensive approach embedded in every level of the education system.

The vision of the Working Group is that, “Ontario’s education system will prepare students with the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and practices for them to be environmentally responsible citizens. Students will understand our fundamental connections to each other and to the world around us through our relationship to food, water, energy, air and land and our interaction with all living things. The education system will provide opportunities within the classroom and the community for students to engage in actions that deepen this understanding” (p. 4).

The Working Group’s intended outcomes consist of eight broad components: students, context, curriculum, teaching, learning, schools, leadership and accountability. These components were created to focus on and provide frameworks for the development of the report’s recommendations. For example, “students will acquire the knowledge . . .” (p. 4), “all teachers will be equipped with the knowledge . . .” (p. 5), and “schools will adopt innovative policies . . .” (p. 5).

The overview of the report emphasizes that environmental education is unevenly implemented throughout Canada. The Working Group claims Ontario is behind other provinces and other parts of the world as well. Although there are programs and initiatives offered by school boards, there is little focus on environmental education and a lack of systems thinking within the curriculum. In addition, the Working Group states that teachers lack resources, knowledge, skills and the background to effectively teach environmental education.

The Working Group recommends that an environmental education policy for Ontario schools be put in place based on its report. This policy would be a collaboration of Ontario ministries and would include adjustments to current practices, topics or strands in the curriculum and the learning environment. Key features in changing the policy include suggestions for system leaders to provide a valuable and supporting framework, to embed environmental education within all subjects as curricula are reviewed, updated, and revised, and to build teacher competence through environmental education requisites, additional qualification courses and opportunities for more outdoor educative experiences. The report concludes with the Working Group’s belief that, for the 21st century, environmental education should be the new “basic” education reform.

This report is a wake-up call as to what is obviously lacking in Ontario schools, students, teachers and curricula. One of the strongest points of the report is the concise compilation of issues and concerns regarding environmental education. The Working Group's recommendations offer insight as to the basic steps needed to increase ecological consciousness in our children. Unfortunately, these recommendations are not enough.

While the Bondar Report appears to address all the issues of environmental education relevant to Ontario classrooms, other researchers and educators have previously identified these same issues. It has been 10 years since environmental science was eliminated from the curriculum and Ontario took a step backwards in offering environmental education and developing ecologically conscious citizens. Not only are environmental education topics not being covered to a great enough extent in schools, but the Ministry continues to put off the necessary changes regarding environmental education at all levels. This report would have been more compelling in 1998 when the issues first arose.

Now in 2008, the critical environmental issues of the world are worsening. According to the David Suzuki Foundation (2007), "Canada makes up less than one half of one percent of the world's population, but is the world's eighth largest producer of carbon dioxide." It is also evident that current educational practices are not preparing our students with the knowledge and skills to be ecologically literate or conscious. This is due to a lack of initiative on the part of the Ontario school system.

According to Puk and Makin's 2006 study, "62% of [Ontario teachers] were not satisfied with the amount of ecological education in the Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines" (p. 272). This study found, "80% of teachers said they did not teach ecological education daily . . . 88% said that less than 2 [hours a week] were taught" (p. 271). In addition, Puk and Makin identified four main

problems associated with implementing ecological literacy: lack of time, resources, teacher training and support.

The vision for environmental education in Ontario stated in the Bondar Report is that the education system will prepare "students with the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and practices for them to be environmentally responsible citizens." For this to happen, all the recommendations of the Working Group need to be put in place. What will happen if only a few of the recommendations are implemented? Will the children of tomorrow be only partially responsible citizens?

While the Working Group recommendations address some of the needs of Ontario's education system, unless environmental education is considered to be as important as the current compulsory curricula, we cannot expect our students to become ecologically informed and engaged citizens. If the Working Group's recommendations are implemented, this will certainly be a step forward. However, environmental education must be compulsory in order for real and lasting change to occur.

### References

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